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Presentation for Panel II: The Human Rights Situation in East Timor From Late 1975 until the Present
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The first thing that strikes you about East Timor is the fear among the people. I've never seen a place where the authorities have succeeded in making so many people so frightened. I've spent years investigating massacres and death squads in El Salvador and Guatemala, but even there the fear was not as all-pervasive as it is in East Timor.

In those Central American countries, some sectors of society feel secure. The army may slaughter peasants, workers, and other dissidents, but at the same time there exists a national elite which sees the army as their friend. In East Timor, however, fear cuts across class lines, for the war is very simply defined in national terms.

In East Timor the army represents Indonesia, and East Timor is governed like an occupied foreign land. In Dili every neighborhood holds at least one military base and the city is honeycombed with clandestine torture and detention centers. Armed troops are everywhere and plainclothes intelligence agents follow their subjects openly. They lounge on corners and stand watch outside the churches and schools.

Even well-off, high ranking, and conservative Timorese often say they feel menaced by the troops. Many have stories of how they have been interrogated, and sometimes beaten and tortured as well. Among the poor majority the terror is electric, and coupled with a powerful desire to somehow get their story to the world. In Dili people warily approach you on the street and, glancing nervously, ask where you come from. If they become convinced you do not work for Indonesia -- and sometimes they simply just ask -- they launch quickly into a story that begins with something like "They'll kill me if they ever find out." They talk of fathers, daughters and brothers who were killed by the army or died while fleeing in the hills. Often they close with a plea to get word of this to Portugal or the United Nations.

This happened to us repeatedly, over and over again, some days with almost every Timorese we met. It happens when you enter a store or public office, sit on a bench or ask directions on the street. Four times in a row we randomly hailed a taxi and each driver told the story of how his family died.

I have never seen such an outpouring anywhere in the world. And even in Central America, in the midst of the assassinations, I never saw such intense insistence that a breech of anonymity meant death.

The fear no doubt is grounded in the fact that East Timor has experienced a holocaust of Cambodian proportions. But it also clearly derives from the fact that the structure of terror is still in place. The army watches everywhere with a system of surveillance and military control more thorough and omnipresent than anyplace I have seen except in certain strategic hamlets in Guatemala's Northwest highlands. Behind the structure lies a policy that is clear to Timorese, and that is that Indonesia is willing to kill as many as it feels it needs to in order to keep discipline and control. High level Timorese sympathetic to Indonesia told of talks with Jakarta officials in which this was made quite clear. They said the officials spoke of 1965, and said they hoped that a return to such tactics would not be needed in Timor. Benny Moerdani virtually said as much when he warned elite Timorese last year that "if anyone wants to talk about a state of TimTim" they should "study Indonesian history. From that you will know and be persuaded that the government has only one resolve...If you try to make your own state and the movement is strong, sufficiently strong, it will be crushed by ABRI...We will crush them all."

Average Timorese say they know this from day to day experience, from the cases of friends and relatives who are tortured, disappeared or killed as soon as the army thinks they've somehow stepped out of line. In Dili this can mean participating in a demonstration, or being active in certain sectors of the Catholic church. In the country we heard often of people who were killed because they farmed or looked for food in off-limits army zones or somehow insulted or defied the authority of troops, policemen, or army commanders.

Perhaps the most unusual thing about this occupation is the extraordinary fragmentation of information among the Timorese. In moving around Dili, and especially in the countryside, it soon became evident that even the best-informed Timorese had only a fragmentary and understated picture of the full scope of army abuse. We often came upon incidents of torture, detention and shootings of which activists and those who follow human rights seemed completely unaware. In many of the rural zones we visited the residents had news of local people who had been killed by the army in recent days or weeks. Yet these events would be unknown to people in adjoining towns, and neither did they ever seem to filter back to the activists and monitors in Dili. More remarkably, information did not even flow within the confines of Dili itself. This is striking because a visitor quickly learns that it is in many ways a very small town.

Various things that are ostensibly secret are commonly known on the street. People can point out the private houses that are used as torture centers and know the names of many leaders of the civilian underground. Walking downtown you often bump into people you met with secretly in sealed rooms the day before. Yet

in spite of this the army commits acts of terror in Dili of which the best-informed Timorese are unaware. We learned of them only through random encounters, and choosing to pursue certain leads. But for Timorese free communication is a political impossibility because the army makes it so.

There is no Timorese press to speak of, and Timorese history,politics, and day-to-day news are taboo in all but some church schools. The mail is opened, the phones are often tapped, and public gatherings invite the suspicion of the "intel." It is a testament to the system's totalitarian reach that no one but the army can really know what's going on. This conclusion is based not just on specific incidents, but also on discussions with those who manage the other social institutions which the army still allows to survive.

This largely successful severing of the lines of social communication went far beyond anything I've ever seen. But one aspect of Timor was extremely familiar and reminiscent of the West Bank and Gaza. Nationalist sentiment and national identity are palpable among the East Timorese. It was striking how, regardless of politics and class, most people held two central tenets: one was that East Timor was a nation of its own and the other that they hated Indonesia. Some people thought that Indonesia had won, and it was time to give up and go along. But the vast majority said they had to keep on fighting and that somehow, someday, things would change. Almost all held the common assumptions that Indonesia was an adversary and that Timor had the right to independence. What disagreements there were turned on estimates of the enemy's power, and the question of whether the outside world would help.

The Indonesian army behaves as if the enemy were everywhere and in this they are almost surely right. Its seems that for now the guerrillas pose no military threat, and some are being starved out of the hills. But the latent opposition seems absolutely massive, and if the army pulled back they would probably lose control. There is an extensive underground, through fragmented and repressed, and despite the fear some people still speak out. In recent years the public actions have been mounted by the young, but it seems clear that the society stands behind them.

Indonesia has mounted a strategy of repopulating East Timor, and in some ways the results have been dramatic. In many towns, especially Dili, it often takes time to find a resident who is actually an East Timorese. Especially in the modern facilities, like Dili's schools and office buildings, for which Indonesia has received such positive press, a majority of the workers and clients are often not East Timorese, but settlers from various parts of Indonesia. These settlers occupy many of the high and mid-level jobs, and see Timor as an economic frontier. Their

relations with the Timorese seem distant and chilly at best and among the young, taunts and fighting are commonplace. They speak of themselves as Indonesians who have come to work and their privileges in the system are straightforward. There are economic preferences but the fundamental fact is that they live outside the Timorese veil of fear. They have an Indonesian quota of deference to the army and state, but know that the troops have not been sent to keep an eye on them. In numerical terms the settlers have increased the Indonesian hold, but, politically and socially among the Timorese, many see them as civilian occupiers whose presence makes them boil.

Even if the Indonesian army left Timor tomorrow, its presence would linger on for years in the bodies of undernourished children. Residents say that the food situation was better before Indonesia invaded. But regardless of the conditions that prevailed before 1976, it is clear that current army activities create hunger that does not have to be. Villagers are still clustered in supervised settlements near the roads, and farmers are not free to work all their lands. Broad, formerly cultivated areas are effectively off-limits, and farmers who venture in have been disappeared and shot. The consequence in various villages is diminished food production, made drastic when the weather is not good. In some cases the army quarantines villages for political infractions, and keeps residents from their fields for weeks on end. All this overlays a decade and a half of violent disruption, in which crops were burned, animals executed, and entire communities were driven into long-term odyssey during which the youngest, the oldest, and the least robust tended to die along the way (Some such refugees, it should be noted, are still fleeing in the mountains, and those who come down say the army still bombs and strafes). When this is inflicted on a farm economy without much surplus to begin with, it is not surprising that the result is devastation. Teachers complain of children whose development is impaired and are undersize and underweight for their age. One can see in Dili and moreso in the countryside, a substantial minority of children whose limbs are thin and spindly, and who are growing locks of orange hair. Among the younger children you see some distended bellies, and you see them everywhere and every day.

If the US government truly stands with President Bush when he says that Saddam Hussein has committed crimes, then the same standard we apply to the invasion and destruction of Kuwait must, in fairness, be applied to East Timor. There is no avoiding the obvious conclusion that Timor's suffering has been far worse. The question is whether we will choose to overlook that fact because in this case those committing the crimes are armed and sponsored by the United States.

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